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The Defector: Tales From the Other Side

Yelena Mitrokhina, Remembering the Dark Secrets

By David Remnick
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You know Yelena Mitrokhina.

She's the Woman in the Blond Wig.

One August afternoon seven years ago, while her husband was working at the Soviet Embassy, she met with four FBI agents and drove off in a taxi. She was the first person ever to defect from the Soviet Embassy in Washington.

Two weeks ago when high-ranking KGB officer Vitaly Yurchenko walked away from his CIA handlers in a Georgetown bistro and made headlines by redefecting, Yelena Mitrokhina donned a frumpy blond wig and sunglasses and, for the first time, spoke out in public, appearing on ABC's "Nightline," Cable News Network and the front page of The Washington Post. Although there is no way to check all the details of her story as she tells it, sources including the FBI and the Wharton School of Business, where she earned a degree in 1980, confirm Yelena's saga. She became an American citizen last year.

In her way, Yelena Mitrokhina knew Vitaly Yurchenko like no one else:

"My closest encounter with Mr. Yurchenko was in October 1977. He was head of embassy counterintelligence. There had been a woman, an embassy wife, who had struck up a friendship with an American neighbor. She started seeing him, quite openly, just walking together, talking. When Yurchenko found out, she was sent home to Moscow within 24 hours.

"By that time I was in a similar situation. I was very friendly with an American man. He was my car dealer. I had a lot of problems and thought I could confide in him. The night that woman was sent home, Yurchenko called a meeting of all embassy wives. He started talking about the weakness inherent in women, about how we must not succumb.

"Have you ever been in a theater and you get the feeling that the actor is talking directly at you and no one else? That was how I felt. I thought Yurchenko knew all about me. I sat there, with 30 other women in the room, the wives of all the most powerful Russian diplomats in Washington, and I thought to myself, 'Well, Yelena, you're next.' "

In her wig and sunglasses, Yelena Mitrokhina suggests Tony Curtis' drag performance in "Some Like It Hot." In reality, she is dark-haired, dark-eyed, attractive and smartly dressed. Her English would shame a native.

"My friends say that I was born in Russia only by accident," she says. "And they're right. I was born to live in America." Yelena says, "I did not want to spend my life working for a system. I wanted to live for myself."

Born 41 years ago in Leningrad, she grew up a privileged and only child. Her father was an air force colonel "whose philosophy was the front page of Pravda." Her mother was more irreverent, "a free spirit who taught me how to live my own life."

Yelena, like many Russians, favors a certain bluntness of speech. She is not shy, announcing "that I got straight As in school. I have an IQ of 154." At the University of Leningrad she studied Norwegian and English. She worked summers as an interpreter for visiting delegations from Norway, Britain and the United States. "I guess that's when I first got a taste for the West," she says. "It wasn't really political, it was the people I met, their openness."

At 19, Yelena married the son of a prominent Soviet writer, "a kind of playboy" who was later diagnosed as schizophrenic. "I was very much in love with him, but we just could not live together," she says. "He threatened me and almost killed me. We divorced after a year. I was devastated."

While a graduate student in sociology, she met Lev Mitrokhina, a professor at the Academy of Sciences. As soon as he could divorce his first wife, they married in 1970. Yelena was again a member of the privileged class, the *nomenklatura*.

"People who know that I'm a defector assume that I was a dissident," she says, "but I was never anything close to that when I was living in Russia. I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. When I moved to Moscow with my husband, my status just went up. Lev was a member of the Russian old boys' network. He'd been in charge of propaganda when he was young and in the Komsomol [Communist Party youth organization]. We had a car, good food, a nice apartment. Like any Russian with a little money and brains, I could get lots of foreign goods. I don't ever remember wearing any Soviet-made clothes."

One of Lev Mitrokhina's "old-boy" friends in 1975 was Boris Pankin, head of the newly formed Soviet copyright agency. Pankin asked Lev to become a first secretary at the embassy in Washington and open a copyright office on K Street. Yelena was delighted.

"At the embassy you get the best of the two worlds," she says. "You live with diplomatic immunity, a free apartment, medical care and an environment of familiar Russian people. The majority of the intellectual elite in Moscow paled by comparison with the top rank of diplomats in Washington.

"We had access to so many more books, to magazines and journals and the television news. I remember some friends and I played a game by comparing an issue of Pravda and The Washington Post, and we discovered that in Russia certain events just do not exist. And the TV! I remember 'The Six Million Dollar Man' was very big. We would race back from Pioneer Point [the Soviet "dacha" in Maryland] on Sunday nights to watch it. I guess we didn't know about reruns yet."

There were a few restrictions. Embassy personnel were not allowed to have credit cards or checkbooks. "We always carried cash," Yelena says. "That made us the best mugging targets in the city."

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The Mitrokhinas lived in Chevy Chase and worked together at the copyright office, but their marriage was coming apart slowly. Lev was drinking heavily. Yelena "felt like just another utility in the house." When she asked her husband to accompany her to the hospital for the birth of her second child [in January 1977] he refused to go. "I couldn't believe it," she says. "He said, 'Come on, what do you need me there for?' Well, that did it. I never got over that. I was an absolute doormat."

If she were to confide in her Russian friends, she thought, Yurchenko and the other embassy officials might find out and send the family back to Moscow.

"I was trapped," she says. But soon Yelena found an American friend. "I went to fix my car at a local Oldsmobile dealership and I met a nice older man in April 1977. He looked like Gregory Peck. His name was Ed."

Careful not to attract attention from the embassy, Yelena began meeting Ed for coffee, for long rides and walks. "It wasn't a love affair," she says, "he was a father figure, 30 years older than me," but Yelena would tell Ed about her problems, her husband, her isolation in the embassy.

But when Yurchenko held his "warning" meeting at the embassy in October 1977, Yelena became frightened. "I figured by then they had probably a couple of pictures of my friend and I. So I saw him one night and told him I couldn't see him for a while. I said, 'There are leaks and you Americans can't keep a secret.' He didn't reassure me, but he did say, 'Look, I understand, but if you ever decide you want to stay, tell me.' That's when I started to think."

After two months Yelena met once more with Ed. She told him she was ready to defect.

"I want to take you up on your offer," she told him.

"Okay," she recalls him saying. "But I have to tell you something. I'm cooperating with the FBI." He was not a career agent, he said, but the bureau had asked him to provide information on Yelena because of his friendship with her.

They arranged a meeting at a Holiday Inn in Rosslyn.

"We met at the Olds dealership and we drove to the hotel. He took me up to a room, introduced me to the FBI man, a guy named John," says Yelena. "I knew what John was thinking. He was thinking I might be a double agent, that I might have been out to set them up. I had no access to sensitive information at the embassy, so what was in it for them? I was afraid they might call the embassy and say, 'We don't want her.' "

"Why would you want me?" she asked the agent.

"First of all," he said, "this country was built on the principle that people should live where they want. And second, we want to set a precedent. There have been defectors in New York, but none from the embassy in Washington. We want to show it can be done."

Yelena thought she could trust the agent. But she told him she could not act immediately. She wanted to visit her parents in Leningrad. Her mother had never seen her infant grandson.

"That will be dangerous," the agent said. "It's crazy. You shouldn't go. We can provide protection here, but in Russia you're on your own."

"Maybe," Yelena said, "but that's what I'm going to do."

She flew to Moscow in March 1978.

"I had to accomplish a lot in three weeks. I wanted to fix up our flat in Moscow as much as possible. I knew that my husband would probably not want to defect with me. And even though our marriage was bad, I was worried about him. I wanted him to be comfortable if he went back to Moscow."

She and the children met with her mother. Yelena also sold off as many things as possible—clothing, jazz and rock records, a fake fur—that could be converted into cash. She gave the cash to her mother.

At the airport Yelena said goodbye to her mother for the last time.

"I never told her what was going to happen," she says. "But from the look in her eyes, I knew that she knew."

Within two weeks of returning to Washington, Yelena received the news that Arkady Shevchenko, a high-ranking diplomat in the Soviet mission in New York, had defected. It was a tremendous blow to the Soviets. Indeed, they were to learn later that Shevchenko had been a CIA informer for three years before defecting.

In Washington, Yurchenko increased security. Another blow came when Lev Mitrokhina's request for an extension to stay in Washington was rejected. He and Yelena were ordered to return to Moscow in early September.

"From then on I knew I had to act fast," she says.

One day Yelena was asked to ride with Soviet press attaché Valentin Kamenev to Dulles Airport for the weekly Aeroflot flight to Moscow and then drive the car back to the embassy. Kamenev was a friend and the favor seemed simple enough.

But within minutes Yelena got a phone message "from a buyer for her car." She was not selling her car. She knew it was a coded message and Yelena called her contact at the FBI.

"Don't go to the airport," the agent said. The agent warned her that the FBI had reason to believe that the KGB would force her onto the Aeroflot flight.

"I can't refuse," said Yelena. "He's one of our closest friends and he needs this favor. What should I do?"

"Look, don't go anywhere close to the tarmac or the lounge," the agent said. "At the first sign of trouble, take off your glasses and wipe them with a handkerchief."

At Dulles, Yelena stayed away from the lounge or the entrance to the plane. The airport was crowded with FBI agents. One even had a letter signed by President Carter ordering Aeroflot to hold the plane.

As it turned out, the agents did not have to act. Yelena never had to wipe her glasses.

"You read about these things in books all the time," she says. "All of a sudden it was happening to me."

By then the Mitrokhinas were no longer living in Chevy Chase. They had a ground floor apartment with a back porch in The Chatham, a high-rise building in Arlington just off Rte. 50.

Lev had cut down on his drinking and had learned to drive. Each morning he would call home when he had arrived at work.

On a day in early August, Yelena waited for his call.

"I might be out later," she told him. "The neighbors asked me over for tea, but I'll be here when you come home for lunch."

As soon as Lev had left for work, Yelena packed two suitcases. She put two letters on the dining room table. One was addressed to the embassy, saying she was defecting but that she still loved her country. The second was addressed to Lev, asking him to consider defecting with her and the children.

Then, with her children in tow, Yelena took the elevator up to the second floor where the FBI had rented an apartment. Yelena was pale. Her year of perpetual nervousness had reached

a terrible peak. "I was a wreck," she says. She took a mild tranquilizer.

After a brief planning session, Yelena, the children and the four agents went out to the street where they were met by a taxi driven by another agent. They drove to a motel on Rte. 50 in Arlington. An official from the Immigration and Naturalization Service met them there and handed Yelena a green card and papers saying that she had defected freely. She signed them "without hesitation." She then left the children in the motel room with a female agent.

Yelena and three agents drove back to The Chatham in the taxi. It was a hot day, and they waited in back of the building, watching the driveway and the porch for nearly a half hour. Finally Lev arrived. Other agents watched Lev enter the apartment, walk to the dining room table, open and read the two letters. When he was finished reading the letters Lev walked outside to the back yard where he met Yelena and three agents.

The FBI was worried that Lev would get violent, that he would panic. But he was composed.

"This is crazy," he told his wife. "You will ruin your life."

"I've made my decision."

The FBI badly wanted Lev to defect, too, but Lev told the FBI and his wife that he needed time to think. All the while Yelena was of two minds about her husband. She knew that they would eventually divorce. "I don't know if I wanted him to stay or come with me," she says now. "I was 50-50."

The FBI moved Yelena and the children to a hotel in Fredericksburg, Va. Late into the night Yelena and Lev talked by phone. At last Lev said no, he could not defect.

"In my heart I knew he could not do it," says Yelena. "He's 14 years older than me, and to start a new life at 48 was difficult. He had an incredibly comfortable life in Moscow. He really loved it there. You have to understand the Russian's love for his country. His father was a general in the MVD [the internal militia] but he was arrested on a trumped up charge in 1948. He died in a concentration camp. But still my husband was faithful to the motherland. It's a strange turn of the Russian mind."

At the end of their last phone call, Lev told Yelena, "I must be buried on Russian soil."

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Five days after defecting, Yelena went through perhaps the most trying obstacle in the defection process, a

as U.S. officials were allowed to interview Yurch nko before he flew to Moscow, two Soviet embassy officials interviewed Yelena at the State Department. Standard procedure.

"They were very clever," she recalls. "They had one guy who was the fatherly type. And he would say, 'Think of what this will do to your mother' and 'You know it's not too late to change your mind.' That sort of thing, playing on my sympathies. And the translator from the State Department was translating for everybody in the room. Meanwhile the other guy, KGB I'm sure, leaned across the table and mumbled, so the translator wouldn't hear, 'We'll get you. We know where your mother lives, too.' "

After the interview Yelena and the children moved to a "safe house" in McLean and there began a long series of debriefing sessions with the FBI and the CIA. For more than a month, from 9 to 5 every day, Yelena rendered her biography over and over. She answered questions about the embassy, about her husband, about Russia in general, All the while she knew the agents were aware that she could be a double agent.

Yelena was often upset by the debriefing process but she felt better when one CIA agent offered to take her and her children trick-or-treating. The Mitrokhinas had never heard of Halloween.

"They never told me their real names," she says of the agents. "But they had a tendency to slip. One woman took me to her optometrist to get some contact lenses, and the receptionist said, 'Oh, Miss So-and-So, your next appointment is next week.' She used her real name. The agent tried to tell me they were talking about her sister. They are not always as careful as they should be."

Yelena had made only two requests before her defection. She wanted absolutely no publicity, and she wanted the government to put her through business school. Her Soviet degrees would not do her much good in the Washington work place.

"When can I begin business school?" she asked an agent one night.

"We are going to send you to secretarial school," her CIA handler told her.

Yelena was shocked and depressed. "I was hysterical," she says. "I thought, 'Jesus Christ, I've risked my life to learn typing!' " The next morning she called one of her original FBI handlers, one of her "white knights."

"Look guys," she said. "What are they trying to do to me?"

The next day she received a phone call.

"They said, 'Cheer up, girl. You're going to Wharton.' "

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Yelena and her two children moved to Devon, a Philadelphia suburb, in January 1979. The government provided the tuition at the University of Pennsylvania, day-care costs for Yelena's children, plus $13,000 a year, a small stipend compared with the $60,000 "salary" given Arkady Shevchenko and the alleged $1 million CIA chief William Casey offered Yurchenko.

In the meantime, Yelena learned that in Moscow her husband had denounced her publicly and that her parents had divorced. In the divorce suit, her father charged her mother with not bringing up Yelena properly.

Things were little better in Philadelphia.

"The loneliness there was incredible," Yelena says. "As a defector you have no past. I couldn't tell people the truth about myself. All you can do is lie, and when you lie you get tripped up, you contradict yourself. Being a defector, you must be an amnesiac.

"Sometimes I would drive to D.C. just to be with my FBI friends. The CIA doesn't like it when you do that. They want you to forget the past and stand on your own two feet. But I had to be myself once in a while."

Yelena finished the two-year MBA program in 18 months and moved back to the Washington area. Her children are in school now. They don't know a word of Russian. They know their mother is divorced. "I told them that sometimes two people just don't get along," says Yelena. "They handle it pretty well. Half their friends have divorced parents."

Yelena's social life is still difficult. She said she was in two relationships "that were headed to marriage until I told them my story.

"Honesty cost me. The first guy worked for the World Bank and he couldn't continue. His ex-wife threatened to complain to the bank and ruin his career. The other guy worked for a company and he was going through a security clearance for one of his business affairs. As soon as I told him, he disappeared from my life. I never saw him again. When I hear that Washington men are career-oriented, I know it's true."

The children, who are 11 and 9 now, are thoroughly Americanized. "They can smell a Big Mac for miles," says Yelena. From Russia Yelena receives occasional (and censored) letters from her mother. Nothing from her father. She legally divorced her husband and has not heard from him.

Yelena tells most acquaintances she is an émigré "who got here by swimming across the ocean." She doesn't see many Russian friends and keeps only a few Russian books in her house. "I keep Bulgakov's books around. Some things I can't do without."

She is self-employed businesswoman, but she is reluctant to share her specific area of interest with everyone. She tells her visitor her profession, and it seems harmless enough, but says, "I'd rather my clients didn't know my story. People are people. Just say I make my $60,000 a year, like my work and live my life." Yelena says she will stop working if she can earn enough money from writing a book about her defection.

Every year she renews a notarized document that says that if she ever appears at a press conference saying she has decided to go back to the Soviet Union, Americans should consider it KGB coercion. Yelena says she will renew the statement "for as long as I live."

DUDLEY M. BROOKS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Yelena Mitrokhina: "As a defector you have no past."